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## Anticipating The *Tsunami*: Rumours, Planning and The Arbitrary State in Zimbabwe

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## ANTICIPATING THE *TSUNAMI*: RUMOURS, PLANNING AND THE ARBITRARY STATE IN ZIMBABWE

*Joost Fontein*

### BREAKING HOUSES, ANTICIPATING THE *TSUNAMI*

One morning in July 2005, Tanaka phoned to say he was dismantling the 'cottages' (one-roomed houses) behind his house in Harare's southern, and relatively poor, low-density suburb of Hatfield. Arriving at the scene I found him breaking the walls of one 'cottage' with a small hammer. With two tenants, we spent most of the day dismantling walls, removing windows and doors, stacking reusable bricks, and debating what to do with the remaining rubble. Covered in dust, we kept a watchful eye on the front gate, waiting for the police and council officials to turn up to destroy any 'illegal structures'. As long as we were dismantling the houses ourselves, we felt confident they would not do it for us; in this way we would be able to save some of the materials. It was a slow business and by mid-afternoon we had only dismantled two out of five cottages.

As we worked Tanaka explained how, as a boy, he had helped his late father form the concrete blocks we were now trying to save. '*Zvinorwadza!*' ('It hurts!') he exclaimed, and we all understood that this referred not only to the destruction of inherited property, but also to the loss of rent from these cottages that supplemented his low income, which is under much pressure from family responsibilities also inherited upon his parents' death. '*Zvinorwadza!*' could also have referred to the situation of the families – tenants but also friends – that Tanaka had been forced to evict earlier that morning. For the two tenants helping us it undoubtedly resounded uneasily with the knowledge that their homes were next in line for our hammers. But not that day; by late afternoon the *tsunami*, as Operation Murambatsvina/Restore Order was popularly known as, had not arrived. Three days later the government announced a reprieve for low-density suburbs:<sup>1</sup> ten days to regularize plans for 'illegal structures',

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<sup>1</sup>'Zimbabwean high-income homeowners get temporary demolition reprieve', *Voice of America*, 16 July 2005, ([www.zimbabwesituation.com/jul17\\_2005.html](http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/jul17_2005.html)), accessed 15 December 2008.

at a price of Z\$24 million.<sup>2</sup> Two weeks later on 27 July 2005, a period punctuated by much media activity surrounding a visit by the UN special envoy, Mrs Tibaijuka, Vice-President Mujuru announced that Operation Murambatsvina was now over.<sup>3</sup>

A few days after destroying two of his 'cottages', at an impromptu barbecue at my home, Tanaka mused he had been lucky the *tsunami* officials had not arrived that day and that there had been no time to destroy the other cottages – 'that is lucky for me and lucky for the people living in them'. He could have added he was lucky the actual roof over his head had not been threatened and, furthermore, that in low-density Hatfield the *tsunami* only amounted to small groups of officials wandering from house to house, inspecting planning documents and notifying people to dismantle 'unplanned structures' – rather than materializing as forced evictions from 'illegally' squatted areas, or as bulldozers flattening informal markets and homes, offering owners and inhabitants only minutes to remove property, as had happened in Chitungwiza, Mbare and elsewhere across Harare and the country.<sup>4</sup> As some people made comparisons with past, Rhodesian-era 'slum clearances', another guest at the party commented that his home, a rented backyard cottage nearby, had been spared ('it had a plan', apparently) but his workplace was due for destruction. He and his colleagues had decided to risk the uncertainty, and 'wait until the bulldozers arrived'. But the family of four from Chitungwiza, who now squashed in with the six of us already sharing a two-bedroom flat, had had hardly any opportunity to wait before their two-room cottage was destroyed by officials some weeks before.

That day Tanaka said he was now concerned about the planning fees he might have to pay,<sup>5</sup> but a few weeks later, after the end of the 'operation' was announced, he felt more confident that he could avoid paying for 'formal planning', as by then it seemed unlikely the *tsunami* would strike again.<sup>6</sup> At the barbecue Tanaka asked me, off the cuff, what the 'party' was for. I said it was a spur of the moment thing; as it was Saturday, we decided to invite a few friends over. He replied, 'That's exactly like this *tsunami*. One day somebody just went to work and said, let's do this, and that started all this off!' (Notes, 18 July 2005).

<sup>2</sup> About £1,400 at the official exchange rate of that moment, or £522 on the black market, then (27 July 2005) at Z\$46,000/£.

<sup>3</sup> ZHR NGO Forum (2005b: 1). Despite Mujuru's announcement official activities against informal traders and illegal housing continued sporadically for several more months.

<sup>4</sup> Potts (2006a) examines the different definitions of 'squatters', 'illegal structures' and 'informal housing' that have been employed in government statements, newspapers and NGO reports, presenting a nuanced view of the particular urban areas, populations and types of housing most severely affected by Murambatsvina. See also Bratton and Masunungure 2006; Mujere 2007; Vambe 2008a.

<sup>5</sup> Adding that 'those people [city council] will be making a lot of money' (Notes, 18 July 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Anyway, he added, 'the council offices are so overrun with applications for planning registration, it seems unlikely they will be able to enforce it all' (Notes, 18 July 2005).

LUCK AND PLANNING<sup>7</sup>

Although the impact of Zimbabwe's *tsunami* on Tanaka's situation seems minor in comparison to the many, much less fortunate, people in high-density suburbs and peri-urban settlements, or working as informal traders, elsewhere across Zimbabwe,<sup>8</sup> the events above do reveal a tension common to many experiences of Operation Murambatsvina. This tension relates to the disjuncture between official pronouncements about the need to 'restore order' – to reassert formal planning procedures, bye-laws and local state institutions – and the contradictory experience of the apparently arbitrary application and often extreme, sometimes violent, execution of the operation by council officials, police and the military, which for many seemed to operate outside of the legitimate, bureaucratic 'state'. There were many ironic and graphic illustrations of this tension. If in Harare the aim was to restore the city's 'sunshine' status, Murambatsvina often created more squalor than it removed. In many cases good-quality, albeit unplanned or 'illegal' housing was destroyed, only to be replaced by exactly the kind of ramshackle, temporary structures which are common to so many informal urban settlements across the continent, but had been comparatively rare in Zimbabwe. The destructions created vast quantities of rubble, which were such an eyesore in Chitungwiza and elsewhere that councils issued statements requiring people to remove rubble under threat of further fines.<sup>9</sup> With reusable materials stacked up loosely to create temporary shelters for the newly homeless, unusable rubble was promptly deposited into the streets, filling potholes and exacerbating the 'post-*tsunami* look' from which the operation got its nickname.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Fieldwork for this article was conducted under trying circumstances. Awaiting formal clearance for another research project in Masvingo, and conscious that I was under some surveillance, I could not collect the ethnographic material in this article through formal interviews and surveys. Instead, it was collected through careful observations and recordings of events and conversations witnessed across Harare, but particularly in the southern, low-density suburb of Hatfield and in the high-density area of Chitungwiza, the two areas where I spent most of my time between June and September 2005. During this period I lived in a small backyard cottage in Hatfield with five other people, where we were joined in late June by a family of four from Chitungwiza (relatives of my housemates) whose rented accommodation was destroyed in the events. Later, when I was doing fieldwork in Masvingo (September 2005–July 2006), I frequently returned to Harare for fuel, rest and to visit relatives in Hatfield and Chitungwiza. In Masvingo I often visited contacts in Mucheke high-density suburb from where further ethnographic material derives. While the arduous conditions of its collection means the ethnography here may appear anecdotal, it is based on having been there at the time, talking to people on the ground, helping some of those whose homes were destroyed, and in one case assisting in the very demolitions. These experiences texture the article's engagement with the myriad of rumours that circulated at the time.

<sup>8</sup> One estimate suggested up to 700,000 people were made homeless, and that indirectly almost a quarter of the population were affected (Tibaijuka 2005).

<sup>9</sup> 'Clean-up: rubble to attract \$1.5 m penalty', *Sunday Mail*, 19 June 2005.

<sup>10</sup> The requirement to remove rubble also led to a new kind of informal economy as groups of enterprising young men offered to dismantle 'illegal structures' and remove rubble in return for fees. In a strange way, then, the 'demolitions' did 'create jobs' as 'unemployed urban

The tension between the stated aim of 'restoring order', and the operation's brutal and indiscriminate (but often admittedly thorough and efficient) execution, was reflected in public forums. While government media stressed the reassertion of order and planning, the MDC opposition, independent media, the United Nations<sup>11</sup> and various NGOs emphasized the government's abandonment of legal rights and its recourse to a new set of violent political exclusions. In a small way, the events that I have begun to describe capture how this tension appeared on the ground. Tanaka and many others I spoke to in Hatfield, in high-density Chitungwiza and elsewhere, talked of their situation as a mixture of luck and planning. Contrary to both sides of the polarized media debates, I suggest the *tsunami* was experienced both as a 'reassertion' of formal planning, which resonated with people's memories of past (colonial and post-colonial) enforcement of urban regulations, limitations on informal markets, and sometimes evictions and clearances (Dorman 2007: 10; Mujere 2007: 6; Horn 1994), and as a 'display' or demonstration of 'state power' deployed on a whim. In this article I argue it is precisely in the ambiguity and uncertainty generated by this tension, between the spectacle of ZANU PF's ability to deploy 'state power' as it chooses (that is, arbitrarily), and the resonances of official appeals to the reassertion of formal, bureaucratic planning and 'governance', that the political advantages of this operation for the ruling party become apparent.

#### ARBITRARY FORCE

'He (President Mugabe) is like our father—but one who takes a stick and beats the child who says "I'm hungry".'<sup>12</sup> This quote encapsulates what I mean by suggesting that Operation Murambatsvina was, in part, experienced as a demonstration of 'arbitrary force'. Like the father who beats his child, the brute force of the operation was 'arbitrary' not so much because it did or did not conform to the plethora of different logics and motivations ascribed by diverging rumours—there were too many contradictory explanations circulating for such an argument to work. Rather, it was 'arbitrary' exactly because its unexpected suddenness and brutality was *experienced* regardless of whether its motives would ever be properly understood. In other words, Zimbabwe's *tsunami* demonstrated clearly that this level of state machinery could be deployed at the whim of the ruling echelons of ZANU PF, regardless of the uncertainty that surrounded, and still

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youths ... organised themselves into demolition gangs hired to pull down illegal structures for a fee', as was reported in the *Sunday Mail* (26 June 2005).

<sup>11</sup> According to the UN representative, the operations were 'carried out in an indiscriminate and unjustified manner, with indifference to human suffering and, in repeated cases, with disregard to several provisions of national and international legal frameworks' (Tibaijuka 2005: 1).

<sup>12</sup> 'Commentary from couple living in a lean-to in Njube, Bulwayo, June 2006', cited in Solidarity Peace Trust (SPT) 2006.

surrounds, the intentions behind these events. Whatever motivations may have lain behind Operation Murambatsvina, it was a massive spectacle of power that clearly displayed the capacity of the ruling elite to deploy state forces as it chose. I am arguing that, like the 'arbitrary power' of a monarch (cf. Foucault 1975), Zimbabwe's *tsunami* was experienced, in part, as an 'expression of sovereignty' akin to (but necessarily less 'ultimate' than) Mbembe's notion of 'necropolitics' (2003: 11).

Indeed the popular use of the word *tsunami* to describe the operation captures perfectly its perceived 'arbitrariness', as well as graphically portraying the levelled houses and rubble that lined suburban streets after May–July 2005. It was also, obviously, a way in which people were able to relate their experiences to international events earlier that year. Yet even the discrepancy in the Shona and English versions of the official names given to the programme—Operation Murambatsvina (literally, refuse/reject the rubbish/filth) and Operation Restore Order—captures something of the tension I am trying to highlight. As one NGO report remarked,<sup>13</sup> there is an 'unfortunate similarity in meaning of *Murambatsvina* and *Gukurahundi*', the latter being the much more violent government campaign in Matabeleland in the 1980s, when an estimated 20,000 civilians were killed (CCJP 1997). Whether these resonances were deliberate or not, it is clear that many victims felt that they were the *tsvina* (literally, dirt, filth, human waste) that was to be cleared out.<sup>14</sup>

This attitude was not surprising given that Police Commissioner Chihuri reportedly said the purpose of the operation was 'to clean the country of the crawling mass of maggots bent on destroying the economy'.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Deputy Minister Chihota (Industry and International Trade) told Parliament that the 'thousands of refugees spawned by "Operation Murambatsvina" without rural homes to go to were not "indigenous"'.<sup>16</sup> Noting the efforts that were made to relocate some newly homeless urban communities to rural areas

<sup>13</sup> ZHR NGO Forum 2005a: 17.

<sup>14</sup> 'Please ask [President] Mugabe what it is they want from us. What is the dirt they want to clear out—is it us?' These were the words of a woman who lost her home and livelihood during Operation Murambatsvina, Bulawayo (Amnesty International Report AFR 46/005/2006, 8 September 2006, p. 1).

<sup>15</sup> *The Times*, 17 June 2005.

<sup>16</sup> *Zimbabwe Independent*, 1 July 2005. Although he was forced to withdraw his remarks by the Deputy Speaker, such comments contributed to rumours that the urban clearances were a 'thinly veiled ethnic cleansing campaign'. Another 'senior ZANU PF official', strongly opposed to the operation, described the MP's remarks as 'irresponsible' and revealing of the 'latent xenophobia and subliminal tribalism within a misguided clique in the ruling party'. Perhaps reflecting the widespread unease about the ruling party's precise motives for Murambatsvina, rumours also circulated about deep internal divisions within ZANU PF over the execution of the operation. One junior ZANU PF MP resigned his seat in direct defiance (see *Zimbabwe Independent* 1 July 2005 and *The Standard* 19 June 2005), but suggestions that more would follow did not materialize. That MP was subsequently stripped of his position and lost his farm and other privileges, indicating that if divisions within ZANU PF did exist, such internal opposition was adequately quelled from within.



(Potts 2006a: 279–80; Potts, forthcoming), many interpreted the operation as an attempt by the ruling party to further marginalize largely opposition-voting urban populations<sup>17</sup> – an ongoing process of political exclusion best exemplified by President Mugabe's well-known denigration of the people of Mbare as 'people without totems' (Ranger 2004a; Mujere 2007: 13).<sup>18</sup> Suggestions were also made that the exercise was a Maoist attempt to engineer a rural revolution,<sup>19</sup> effecting demographic manipulation by 'returning' troublesome urban people to rural areas under the closer political supervision of 'traditional authorities' allied to the ruling party.<sup>20</sup> Other rumours suggested that if the aim was to force urban people into rural areas, it was to supply labour for resettled farms in order to bolster the faltering land reform exercise, particularly in the context of drought and dramatic food shortages.<sup>21</sup> In May 2006, long after the operation's 'official' end, one middle-aged vegetable vendor at a Harare shopping centre told me how a few days previously she had been arrested during a police raid,<sup>22</sup> and, instead of being fined or imprisoned, she and others were sent to labour on a farm belonging to Vice-President Mujuru.<sup>23</sup> She described the two days and one night they spent working there, 'harvesting for their families, but they don't even think about our families. What can we do for our families? ... Surely God will punish them for that!' (Notes, 2 June 2006).

The experience of the *tsunami* as a brutal demonstration of ZANU PF's ability to deploy 'state power' arbitrarily (sometimes, as above, in the personal interests of particular individuals) also derived from the apparently selective manner in which the operation was executed

<sup>17</sup> For example, 'Mugabe's pattern of repression', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 1 July 2005; see also Ndlovu 2005; Raftopoulos 2006: 217; Kamete 2006.

<sup>18</sup> One day at Queensdale shopping centre, I witnessed an obviously irritated man asking a street vendor harshly, 'What are you doing here? Didn't Mugabe tell you people to go *kumusha* [to your rural home]? So what are you doing here? Go *kumusha*!' (Notes, 6 July 2005). The man's statement mirrored comments by government officials at the time about the need for 'urbanites' to return 'back to the rural home, to reconnect with one's roots and earn an honest living from the soil our government repossessed under the land reform programme', which reinforced the notion that the operation was a means of re-defining and narrowing Zimbabwean citizenship to those who had rural 'roots' to return to (Potts 2006a and 2008; Mujere 2007; Vambe 2008b).

<sup>19</sup> 'Echoes of Mao in Mugabe's blitz', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 24 June 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Some NGOs and churches later agonized that in their efforts to assist people made destitute and homeless by the exercise, they were in fact carrying out the ruling party's political dirty work (HRW 2005: 18).

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group Africa (CGA) (2005: 5).

<sup>22</sup> During the *tsunami*, and for a long period after its official end, such informal traders had to play a game of cat and mouse with police officers. Like the elderly vendors in Mbare and Highfields that Mujere interviewed (Mujere 2007: 14–16), for some of these middle-aged vendors, running away upon the arrival of officials and police is a less than effective strategy of evading arrest. One day I came to buy some tomatoes when one of them approached me in tears, explaining how all her tomatoes had been deliberately squashed under the boots of an overzealous police officer.

<sup>23</sup> In 2007 *Mail and Guardian* (2 March 2007) reported that hundreds of prisoners were being sent every week to work and labour on farms owned by senior politicians and army officials. See also "'Operation round up': vagrancy – a new target", in SPT (2006: Section 4, 26).



in different urban areas, and the fact that, in some well-reported cases, it was licensed street vendors, formal housing cooperatives and other declared structures, alongside their illegal counterparts, which were affected.<sup>24</sup> Such cases intensified the aura of uncertainty that surrounded the operation, but did not lessen its demonstrative affects. The examples of legalized peri-urban settlements like Epworth, and 'squatter camps' where previous government programmes had resettled people moved from illegal sites within the city (Hatcliffe Extension and Porta Farm), as well as formal housing cooperatives run by churches and, in some cases, war-veteran groups (Tongogara Park on White Cliff Farm), which also fell foul of the operation, exacerbated both the uncertainty and the sense of the arbitrariness of the exercise (Potts 2006a: 282).<sup>25</sup>

The manner in which the exercise was carried out differently in low-, medium- and high-density residential areas of Harare also reinforced the experience of the *tsunami* as a display of force by the ruling party against urban areas where opposition to the ruling party was most significant. Talking to a young man in Chitungwiza, I described how my friend Tanaka had needlessly destroyed two of his houses before the ten-day reprieve for low-density areas was announced.<sup>26</sup> He responded:

'There was something unfair about the fact that people in low density suburbs were given that chance because here in Chitungwiza people were simply told to destroy their illegal structures.' I replied by saying that 'in Mbare it was even worse ... in Mbare the bulldozers just turned up and people scarcely had time to remove their belongings before their houses were razed to the ground, sometimes with road graders!' He responded by saying that was because people in Mbare have a reputation for being tough; as he put it, 'they often boast that they can beat up the police' so that is why they turned up in force and gave people very few chances. (Notes, 30 July 2005)

The young man's response verbalized a common, and probably justified, perspective that it was poorer, high-density townships (like Mbare and Chitungwiza), peri-urban settlements (like Epworth) and 'squatter' settlements (like Hatcliffe Extension and Porta Farm) that

<sup>24</sup> As Potts has discussed, the disproportionate focus on such cases (which were by far in the minority) by the international media illustrates how independent observers often reified the government's own rhetoric, by implying that the real 'crime' of the operation was the destruction of legally planned structures, alongside the 'poor, "shanty" housing ... [that] somehow, regrettably, deserves demolition' (Potts 2006a: 276).

<sup>25</sup> In Chitungwiza, the apparent senselessness of the events further exasperated residents when rumours circulated that Ignatius Chombo, himself formally responsible for the exercise as the Minister of Local Government, had tried, unsuccessfully in some cases, to intervene to save houses belonging to cooperative projects of which he was patron, in apostolic areas of that sprawling suburb (Notes, 30 July 2005).

<sup>26</sup> During our long conversation, he described how, just after the *tsunami* had struck, the road we were walking along 'had been full of people living out in the open ... those few days when it was very cold and it rained, then people really suffered and a lot of people went away, either *kumusha* [to their rural homes] or elsewhere. Others crowded in their relatives' houses' (Notes, 30 July 2005).

were the main target of the operation (Potts 2006a: 286).<sup>27</sup> Certainly the worst cases of police brutality, mass arrests and the use of overwhelming force occurred in these areas. This reinforced common perceptions that the exercise was a form of punishment for urban voters who had overwhelmingly voted against the ruling party in the parliamentary elections of March that year, an opinion that was voiced by MDC MP Paul Themba-Nyathi.<sup>28</sup>

The young man's comments about the reputation of communities in Mbare and other poorer townships probably do, partly, explain why more extreme force was used in those areas. But a related point is the trajectory of the crisis itself. In May, when the *tsunami* first hit the townships, it was met with relatively fierce resistance in the form of riots and public demonstrations. On 23 May 2005 a ZUPCO bus was stoned, and a policeman seriously injured in riots in St Mary's suburb of Chitungwiza, and another eleven officers were hurt when police 'stormed Chigovanyika Shopping Centre'.<sup>29</sup> On the same day, the 'Army [was] put on alert as fears of civil unrest mount', and police 'set up makeshift camps in the city's low income suburbs such as Highfields, Glen View and Dzivarasekwa'.<sup>30</sup> The next day in Glen Norah 'tensions were at a knife edge' after flea markets were destroyed, and the streets were being patrolled by 'heavily armed police'.<sup>31</sup> At the same time the operation spread to other cities including Bulawayo, Kadoma, Nyazura, Odzi, Rusape<sup>32</sup> and later Mutare.<sup>33</sup> By Friday 27 May 2005, 'anti-riot police stormed Mbare' sparking 'a violent response from informal traders who quickly ganged up against the police and overpowered them'.<sup>34</sup> On the same day, Police Commissioner Chihuri warned 'any miscreants within our society who may wish to show their discontent against the current clean up operations to stop the day

<sup>27</sup> Although Potts's careful analysis indicates that, contrary to popular stereotypes, the 'major share' of demolitions 'would have come from backyard shacks in formal townships' (2006a: 284).

<sup>28</sup> '1 million face eviction in Zimbabwe', *Associated Press*, 24 May 2005. Later I heard rumours which suggested that the 'ten-day window' announced for lower density areas was a result of government fears that the wealthier people in those areas were more likely to seek legal recourse, or, alternatively, because the ruling elite had their own properties and families to protect in those areas. There were some legal challenges but few met with any great success. One case was brought by Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights on behalf of a cooperative in the Hatcliffe suburb of Harare, against the Ministry of Local Government and Harare city council. The judge found that in that particular case the actions of the government were legal, but also stated that 'untold suffering' had been caused to people and that 'a few days notice was ... not adequate' (see ZHR NGO Forum 2005a: 22; and Human Rights Trust 2005: 4).

<sup>29</sup> *Zim Online* (SA), 23 May 2005. While in Chitungwiza 'angry residents beat up the police' (*Zimbabwe Standard*, 24 May 2005), in Mabvuku 'police fought running battles with residents' (*New York Times*, 24 May 2005).

<sup>30</sup> *Zim Online* (SA), 24 May 2005.

<sup>31</sup> *Zim Online* (SA), 25 May 2005. Riots and looting also broke out in Glen View and Budiro as 'angry mobs vandalized property and barricaded roads', *Daily Mirror*, 25 May 2005.

<sup>32</sup> *SW Radio Africa*, 25 May 2005.

<sup>33</sup> *Zim Online* (SA), 31 May 2005.

<sup>34</sup> *Zim Online* (SA), 27 May 2005.

dream forthwith as the ZRP [police] has adequate resources to ensure that peace and tranquillity prevail'.<sup>35</sup> By 31 May 2005 an IRIN report (2005) estimated that around 20,000 people had been arrested.

These angry outbreaks of rioting and the heavy police responses led to suggestions that the aim of the operation was, as MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai put it, 'to provoke urban residents into resisting the brutal campaign as an excuse to declare a State of Emergency'.<sup>36</sup> As often seems to happen,<sup>37</sup> there were also predictions that the operation might provoke a popular uprising that would finally force dramatic political change.<sup>38</sup> But these predictions were premature, and the initial riots did not lead to a 'state of emergency'.<sup>39</sup> Heavily reinforced police ensured that, within a few weeks, images of rioting were replaced by much more depressing images of resigned residents dismantling their own houses well in advance of the arrival of police and council officials (Notes, 16 June 2005). Yet after the riots subsided, new forms of 'resistance' did seem to emerge, as rumours spread about residents deploying witchcraft to exact revenge on the officials and police. In Chitungwiza I heard a story of a bulldozer driver targeted with witchcraft by an angry resident: the driver, so the story went, was found frozen, hands stuck fast to the steering wheel of his machine (Notes, 16 June 2005). Another story told of a bewitched man, perhaps a soldier or a policeman, who 'accidentally' shot himself.<sup>40</sup> The extent to which such more subtle forms of subterfuge, or even 'everyday' resistance (Scott 1985 and 1990), were actually deployed are, of course, hard to fathom, but such stories do illustrate how people tried to respond to and make sense of the unexpectedness of Operation Murambatsvina as it unfolded.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 2005.

<sup>36</sup> *Zimbabwe Standard*, 24 May 2005; see also *Associated Press*, 24 May 2005.

<sup>37</sup> For example, in response to the violent beatings of opposition leaders in March 2007, see 'Tsvangirai: Zimbabwe at "Tipping Point"', *Associated Press*, 18 March 2007, ([www.zimbabwesituation.com/mar19\\_2007.html#Z3](http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/mar19_2007.html#Z3)), accessed 15 December 2008; 'Leaders plan end to Mugabe era', *BBC News*, 24 March 2007, ([www.zimbabwesituation.com/mar25\\_2007.html#Z1](http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/mar25_2007.html#Z1)), accessed 15 December 2008; 'Mugabe's enemies now within the gate', *The Zimbabwean*, 17 April 2007; 'Change is coming – the first step in a long journey', Mary Ndlovu in *Fahamu* (Oxford), 29 March 2007.

<sup>38</sup> For example, Lovemore Madhuku, chairman of the National Constitutional Assembly, thought 'now people are really going to react', and another commentator suggested that 'maybe this will be the spark that ignites all of us from our passivity and makes us all rise up and refuse to be abused any longer', *Mail and Guardian*, 25 May 2005, and 'Burning what's left' 24 May 2005, ([www.zimbabwesituation.com/may25a\\_2005.html#link11](http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/may25a_2005.html#link11)), accessed 15 December 2008.

<sup>39</sup> And, as Bratton and Masunungure put it a year later (2006: 45), 'if OM [Operation Murambatsvina] was destined to "tip" ZANU-PF out of power, then such a change would probably have happened by now'. See also CGA 2005.

<sup>40</sup> In Mucheke, Masvingo's high-density suburb, I was told a story of a policeman who destroyed a street vendor's eggs and bananas. Later, at his own home, the same policeman became very sick, and started to complain that he was being bitten by eggs and bananas! (Notes, 19 December 2005).

<sup>41</sup> One informal vendor near Great Zimbabwe in Masvingo suggested that, because officials were aware witchcraft was being used against them, 'when they came to the reserves they were

Such stories were often told in conversations as people questioned why police and other officials were carrying out orders, as if they and their relatives were not also affected by the very same operation (Notes, 16 June 2005). This incongruence was the cause of considerable anxiety and uncertainty among many people I spoke to in Chitungwiza, Hatfield and Masvingo. Stories about war veterans also being targeted by the clearances reinforced this sense of uncertainty,<sup>42</sup> and for quite a long period public denials by Comrade Chinx (a well-known musician/war veteran and government 'praise singer') that his own house had been destroyed in the operation whilst he continued to sing the government's praises, were the subject of jokes amongst people in both high- and low-density areas in Harare.<sup>43</sup>

#### PLANNING

Narratives which illustrate how Operation Murambatsvina was often experienced as a brutal demonstration of 'state power', are repeated across the broad array of NGO reports published since the events, which understandably focus most attention upon its dreadful humanitarian effects. Such reports often emphasize the apparently unplanned spontaneity of Operation Murambatsvina in order to stress the unpredictable, 'tyrannical' nature of the Zimbabwean state. After 'perhaps falling back in horror at what they have done' (Ndlovu 2005), the sudden announcement of Operation Garikai,<sup>44</sup> at the same time as UN envoy Tibaijuka arrived to assess Murambatsvina, was perceived with particular scepticism. As my friend Tanaka put it 'Operation Garikai? There is no such thing!' Independent media reports highlighted the impossibly ambitious targets of Garikai, particularly given the dire economic situation and the fact that no budget allocation had been set aside to fund the '\$1 trillion facility availed by the government'.<sup>45</sup> This lack of fiscal planning, in particular, was used to

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much more careful because everyone knows that in rural areas there is a lot of witchcraft'. 'That is why', he explained, 'at the craft centre they were very careful not to destroy anyone's crafts at all' (Notes, 19 December 2005). Although urban areas were, by far, the worst affected, the operation also targeted informal traders, especially *makorokoza* (illegal gold panners) and residents in rural areas and at growth points. As Chombo put it, 'this exercise is a national exercise and will go to rural areas. We are not going to spare any pocket which is illegal'; see CGA 2005: 6, fn. 2.

<sup>42</sup> For example, 'Govt clean-up, war veterans targeted', *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 2005; see also ZHR NGO Forum 2005a: 17.

<sup>43</sup> See *Sunday Times*, 19 June 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Meaning, literally, 'Live well', this 'follow up' operation was meant to create new housing for the recently dispossessed. Government newspapers began reporting the allocation of stands and the construction of model houses on White Cliff Farm before Operation Garikai was formally announced to coincide with the beginning of the UN Special Envoy's mission. See *The Herald*, 17 June 2005, 21 June 2005, 27 June 2005, 28 June 2005, 30 June 2005 and *Sunday Mail*, 26 June 2005.

<sup>45</sup> When Vice-President Msika announced Garikai, *The Herald* (30 June 2005) reported that 'at least 10,000 housing stands would be developed at White Cliff farm', and a

illustrate the 'unplanned', random nature of the whole exercise, whilst predictions that the huge unbudgeted expenditure would worsen the economy were used to illustrate the irresponsible incompetence of the government.<sup>46</sup>

But fiscal discipline aside, the situation was not quite as simple as is often made out by the normal voices of opposition; official pronouncements about the aim to 'restore order' were not just an empty façade; official appeals to a 'reassertion of planning' did have important, if varying, resonances for people across Zimbabwe's urban areas, alongside the demonstration of power. Of course these resonances differed across Zimbabwe's hugely divergent urban populations.<sup>47</sup> A growing body of literature indicates the deep historical complexity of differing, overlapping and entangled African urban imaginaries, aspirations, and notions of respectability, traversing divisions of class, age, gender, religion and political allegiance (whether to differing nationalist or labour movements pre-independence, or opposed political parties since 1980) across urban Zimbabwe (cf. Raftopoulos and Yoshikuni 1999; Scarnecchia 1999; West 2002; Barnes 1999; Yoshikuni 2007; Maxwell 2006; Ranger 2004b; Ranger 2008). Nevertheless, official appeals to 'order' and 'planning' did hold resonances for people across many of these social divides; they certainly did amongst both poorer and wealthier residents of high-density Chitungwiza and low-density Hatfield with whom I spoke, regardless of whether they actually *approved* of the operation, which most, understandably, did not. The point is that official appeals to 'planning' were *recognizable* to people in these different urban areas, particular those who lived in, rented or owned backward 'cottages', who were numerically probably the most affected by the operation, particularly in Harare's townships (Potts 2006a: 284).<sup>48</sup>

This recognition of official appeals to planning was perhaps best reflected in how people everywhere – in both Hatfield and Chitungwiza

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further 23,000 'had been demarcated at Oda, Hopley and Glaudina farms' around Harare. These figures rose sharply in later reports, and one report states that the government promised 'a million new houses and plots would be established across Zimbabwe in the next four years' (see 'Zim houses "not for officials"', *News24*, 14 March 2006, ([www.zimbabwesituation.com/mar15\\_2006.html](http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/mar15_2006.html)), accessed 15 December 2008). A year later, it was reported that 'only a handful of houses have been built ... these have been surrounded by scandal, including corrupt allocation of the few hundred houses built, to ruling party members. In western Zimbabwe, *not one house under this scheme is fit for occupation* as there are no services connected; out of more than 100,000 displaced people in this region, not one person has yet been officially housed' (SPT 2006: 8).

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, *Zimbabwe Independent*, 1 July 2005 and 8 July 2005; *Daily Mirror*, 7 July 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Just as the 'brand of respectability' of the Assemblies of God described by Maxwell (2006: 81) differed from the 'middle-class respectability' discussed by West (2002), or the elite Christian identity of the Samkange Methodists (Ranger 1995).

<sup>48</sup> Although Potts states that 'legal servants quarters' in low-density areas (LDAs) would not have been affected and that the destruction of other backyard accommodation 'appears to have been relatively exceptional' in these areas (2006a: 285), in the poorer low-density areas in the south of Harare that I was visiting at the time, a considerable amount of backyard housing was destroyed, and many people were made homeless or lost vital income as a result.

at the very least – were to be seen dusting off old planning documents, or newly applying to regularize buildings, or discussing the finer details of what constituted a ‘temporary’, ‘permanent’ or ‘illegal’ structure.<sup>49</sup> This sometimes triggered memories and comparisons with earlier ‘slum clearances’ and past (colonial and post-colonial) periods when enforcement of planning regulations had been much more stringent (particularly in high-density areas) than in the intervening period of the late 1990s (Notes, 16 June 2005). At one household in Waterfalls a group of middle-aged people spent much of the day discussing the *tsunami*:

Mai nini explained that the *tsunami* had reached Southerton, but her place had not yet been affected . . . the house and cottage were OK, and planned, but at the back there are two houses that have a permit as ‘temporary buildings’ . . . she was worried that these might have to be destroyed. Sekuru M. was explaining to Mai nini . . . that there is an issue to do with temporary housing. If it is built with panels, like a panelled durawall, then it counts as temporary, but if the houses are of brick then they are no longer seen as temporary, and therefore must be destroyed. Mai nini confirmed that they are of brick. Sekuru explained that is also why they are worried about their durawall, because, unlike most, it is built of brick and therefore does not comply with planning regulations . . . . He also discussed his well/borehole, which should, officially, be more than 10 metres from any boundary fence, however he also stressed that in this *tsunami* the officials seem more concerned about structures and are likely to overlook the well, particularly in the context of water shortages. (Notes, 12 July 2005)

Although these people, like Tanaka and many others in low-density areas, were in no way the worst affected, even for them the operation provoked considerable anxiety which manifested itself in remarkably minuscule and detailed conversations about what constituted an ‘illegal structure’. Yet despite these people’s worries and concerns, there was also broad agreement that in principle Operation Murambatsvina was a good thing.

Sekuru M and Mai nini were agreeing that town was looking cleaner now, and that there were fewer thieves about, and that overall the *tsunami* was probably a good thing. . . . Sekuru M was saying it is a shame that the conduct of the people actually enforcing the *tsunami* was so bad and so cruel that it was giving the ruling party a bad name! (Notes, 12 July 2005)

The sentiment that the principles behind Operation Murambatsvina were beneficial, and that it was making the streets cleaner and safer, was one that I heard frequently both in Harare’s low-density southern suburbs, and in high-density areas like Chitungwiza.

<sup>49</sup> In late June 2005 I was looking for a small house to rent in Harare’s poorer southern low-density suburbs, an endeavour I postponed when it became clear that the crisis had produced a massive shortage of housing. At almost every property I visited, landlords were poring over faded official council planning documents or rummaging through old files to locate plans, in order to reassure themselves that if the *tsunami* arrived at their door they would be able to demonstrate the legality of their structures.



This was particularly the case in the early weeks of the operation, when informal markets in the city centre were the main target. Initially, many people across Harare seemed to agree with the views of government officials. According to Phillip Chidavaenzi, 'when the authorities in Harare... launched an unprecedented clean-up campaign – presumably meant to restore order in the former "Sunshine City" – residents at first welcomed the manoeuvre, until it assumed a sinister dimension that has led people to revise the true motive behind the campaign'.<sup>50</sup> If the clearances of Harare's CBD areas elicited initial feelings of support from many, for people directly affected in Hatfield, Chitungwiza and elsewhere whom I spoke to, these sentiments changed when the operation began to target 'illegal structures' in residential areas.<sup>51</sup>

Unsurprisingly, government newspapers highlighted the benefits of the operation. On the 22 June 2005, *The Herald* reported that criminal activities in Harare's CBD had fallen by 16 per cent in the previous month.<sup>52</sup> And the *Daily Mirror* commented that 'the city council deserves a pat on the shoulder. The once filthy and unkempt city is on the path of retaining its status as the "sunshine city" within a short and a hectic period of clean up'.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, for the *Sunday Mail* 'positive results have begun to emerge with the restoration of orderliness in the major urban centres which had become havens of lawlessness in the past few years', and 'although there are divergent views over the manner in which the operation is being carried out and although many people have lost their homes, the ultimate goal of the exercise has been widely accepted as noble'.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, despite shrill suggestions that the operation had split the ruling party, many ZANU PF politicians publicly indicated their support for the exercise.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 2005.

<sup>51</sup> There were also obvious class dimensions to divergent attitudes to Operation Murambatsvina. When I asked a Budiriro resident working at Harare municipal offices whether she or her family had been affected by the *tsunami*, she replied gruffly: 'No, we don't have those illegal structures' (Notes, 14 July 2005). The curtness of her response, and the sentiments expressed by others (such as those in Waterfalls above) about the benefits of the operation, suggest that among some middle-class people there was, and perhaps still is, sympathy with the 'prevalent official ideology of a planned and modern urban environment' which Potts (2006a: 276, fn. 14; see also Potts 2006b) argues was 'one of the factors underlying the instigation of Operation Murambatsvina'.

<sup>52</sup> According to Harare's police spokesperson, 'Cases of theft, theft from motor vehicles and house breaking among others have gone down by half compared to those we recorded during the same period last year', *The Herald*, 22 June 2005.

<sup>53</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 22 June 2005. Expressing a sentiment that lucidly illustrates how Murambatsvina could resonate with aspirations to respectability and moral propriety, the writer went further, arguing that the clean-up should also be turned to 'the issue of dressing, especially of our women folk', suggesting that 'something with a name like Operation Kupfeka Kunehunhu [literally, operation dressing decently] will definitely be most welcome'. 'As the country is slowly retaining its identity,' the writer concluded 'inhabitants too have to have an identity'.

<sup>54</sup> 'Clean-up exercise bears fruit', *Sunday Mail* 26 June 2005.

<sup>55</sup> For example: 'Clean up splits ZANU PF', *The Standard*, 19 June 2005; also 'Mbalekwa quits over Murambatsvina as Zanu PF cracks deepen', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 1 July 2005.



Letters in the government press also indicated how the operation could appeal to the particular concerns of different urban residents. One 'concerned citizen' in the capital 'hailed the City of Harare and the ZRP for... making Harare look like what it used to be' and in particular, for 'restricting commuter omnibuses to designated areas' as 'those people' were a 'menace' and 'a law unto themselves' in the city centre. He/she also urged the council to extend the operation to 'timely and regular removal of garbage from residential areas' and expressed concern about the 'very unsightly' rubble from demolished 'illegal structures'.<sup>56</sup> On 22 June 2005, the *Bulawayo Chronicle* published similar letters of support. One applauded the 'clean up campaign against illegal housing co-operatives which were building houses without approval', adding that 'of special concern' was the common occurrence of private developers speculating on housing stands, thereby raising prices in a way which was 'tantamount to daylight robbery'. Another letter, signed 'Homeless', commended the government's commitment 'to restoring order in cities', but also highlighted the plight of civil servants and teachers made homeless by the demolitions, urging the authorities to 'allow school development committees in urban areas to build houses for teachers like their counterparts in rural areas'. Another Bulawayo resident was 'amazed to see the black market raising its ugly head again at Renkini long distance bus terminus', blaming retailers for promoting the 'barbaric' black market by selling sugar in 20kg lots 'using the back door'.

Of course, such letters in the government press are not necessarily representative of the broader public mood, and it seems unlikely that simplistic statements of open support for the operation were widely appreciated by the newly destitute across high-density and peri-urban areas in the country, or the many, such as Tanaka, who lost a vital source of income through the destruction of rent-raising backyard shacks (Potts 2006a: 286 and 288).<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, my own encounters in Chitungwiza, Hatfield and Masvingo do suggest that some of the diversity of issues raised by such letters—such as the conduct of commuter minibuses, the vagaries of the black market, and the lack of housing for teachers—do resonate intimately with the

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Walter Mzembe, the new Masvingo South MP, told Parliament that the operation was 'long overdue', adding that 'the informal sector is an important source of revenue in Zimbabwe [and] there is need to reorganize it so as to create a taxable base', *Daily Mirror*, 22 June 2005; and David Karimanzira, Governor of Harare Province, announced his support in *The Herald* on 1 July 2005.

<sup>56</sup> *Sunday Mail*, 26 June 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Of course the independent press featured numerous letters from residents deploring Operation Murambatsvina. For just a few examples, see: 'A clear crime against humanity – open letter from David Coltart', by D. Coltart, MDC MP, *The Zimbabwean*, 24–30 June 2005; 'Spare a thought for the poor', by 'Very Worried, Harare', *The Standard*, 19 June 2005; 'Have mercy on them', by Fr Oskar Wermter SJ, Harare, *The Independent*, 24 June 2005; 'Pogrom must never be forgotten', by 'Umbrage, Harare', *The Independent*, 24 June 2005; 'Enough fuel to descend on the innocent', by 'VeMaromo, Harare', *The Independent*, 24 June 2005.

daily trials and tribulations of many ordinary urban residents across high- and low-density areas, including, perhaps more so, those directly affected by the *tsunami* in poorer areas dominated by the working and informally employed classes, for whom these particular complaints have much more daily salience than for the wealth-cushioned residents of Harare's northern suburbs. Indeed the issues raised by letters in this vein illustrate how official justifications for the operation could be commensurable with the experiences and aspirations of the poorer, higher-density residents most affected by it. As has become much clearer recently, amid rapidly declining basic public services – and particularly, for example, in the rising numbers of cholera deaths in high-density areas due to massively deteriorating water and sewerage systems<sup>58</sup> – the poor often have much more at stake in issues of service provision, urban planning and 'order' to which official justifications of Murambatsvina appealed, than do the wealthier residents of low-density areas. In August 2008, one long-term resident of Chitungwiza even lamented that Operation Murambatsvina had not delivered on its official promises, as that might have helped prevent rising cholera deaths.<sup>59</sup>

For many older residents the *tsunami* triggered memories of past evictions and 'slum clearances' carried out by the Rhodesian government in Mufakose and other high-density areas in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One old woman, a former resident of Mufakose now living in Hatfield, described how 'this is not new for us, it happened to us when we were young in Mufakose, in our father's house', stressing that 'it was good because the streets were clean, and they built markets for people to sell their things' (Notes, 16 June 2005). Often the *tsunami* also invoked memories of a later, post-independence period of enforcement of urban planning regulations, before the late 1990s heralded increasing official tolerance towards the 'informalization of the economy and environment' (Potts 2006a: 287). For one *mupostori* (member of the apostolic church) living in Unit H in Chitungwiza, the operation rekindled positive memories of the early 1990s, when the council demolished older housing in the area and replaced it with new, affordable 'rent to buy' core houses, which residents were then permitted to extend, subject to compliance with planning regulations.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Chitungwiza, Glen View and Budiriro have been particularly badly affected; see, for example, Combined Harare Resident's Association, 'Cholera outbreaks: residents cannot continue to suffer', 12 September 2008, ([http://www.chra.co.zw/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=94&Itemid=37](http://www.chra.co.zw/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=94&Itemid=37)), accessed 15 December 2008; also 'Zimbabwe: cholera outbreak threatens to become endemic', *IRIN News*, 20 October 2008, (<http://www.irinnews.org/PrintReport.aspx?ReportId=81009>), accessed 15 December 2008; 'Cholera spreads in Harare claiming more lives', *The Zimbabwean*, 4 November 2008.

<sup>59</sup> 'Dai Operation Murambatsvina yakaitwa nemazvo, sekudare, vana vedu vangadai vasiri kufa nemanyoka nhasi. Hurumende haina marii yekutenga mushonga yekucleana mvura' – 'If Operation Murambatsvina had been done properly, like in the past, our children wouldn't be dying of diarrhoea today. The government has no money to buy chemicals to clean the water' (Notes, 21 August 2008).

<sup>60</sup> As he put it, 'Kanzuru payakaita the same kind of operation gore re1993, pavakapunza dzimba dzedu, takagara mumatemporary accommodation, vachitvakira dzimba dzitsva

Such accounts mirror those academic analyses (Potts 2006a and 2006b; Dorman 2007; Mlambo 2008) that have considered Murambatsvina in terms of a longer *durée* of Zimbabwean urban history, indicating that in many respects the exercise was not particularly novel in either form or manner, however unprecedented in terms of 'scale and thoroughness' (Potts 2006a: 276, fn. 14) it clearly was.<sup>61</sup> As Potts (2006a: 284) has pointed out, Zimbabwe was in many ways exceptional across sub-Saharan Africa in that a very small percentage of its urban population lived in the 'slums' common to cities in other developing countries. The reason for this, Potts explains,

is very simple: true squatters (in the tenurial sense) have nearly always been cleared away since (and, of course, before) independence; the development of large-scale major settlements of this type was not allowed. No other African country has maintained such *continuity* of official resistance to such settlements. (Potts 2006a: 284)

Such a longer, historical view reiterates that in many ways Operation Murambatsvina was not unprecedented. Such historical precedents explain how the government's appeals to order and planning could be salient and recognizable to many people in both high- and low-density areas. If Murambatsvina 'did not represent a true change of commitment to "order" by many in the government' (Potts 2006a: 276 fn 14), neither was that commitment to 'order' *unrecognizable* to the widespread urban populations which the operation directly or indirectly affected.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, while firmly castigating ZANU PF incompetence (besides any political motives), Punungwe of the independent *The Standard* acknowledged the operation 'may have had good intentions'.<sup>63</sup> Even Bill Saidi, veteran journalist and former editor of the banned *Daily News*, acknowledged that while the 'orgy of destruction' demonstrated that 'the most illegal structure today is the

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*dzataizobadara se* "rent to buy" – 'When the council did the same operation in 1993, when they destroyed our houses, we lived in temporary accommodation, whilst they were building our new "rent to buy" houses' (Notes, 30 July 2005).

<sup>61</sup> Especially as it came after nearly a decade of increasing tolerance towards informal housing and the spread of 'unplanned' backyard shacks across low-, medium- and high-density areas, and in the recent context of a worsening economic climate in which 70 per cent of the population was relying on the informal economy for subsistence and livelihoods.

<sup>62</sup> Even the 'misplaced' emphasis of the international media upon the minority of cases when 'legal' buildings were being destroyed may have represented not only 'a lack of appreciation that some element of "illegality" ... is ubiquitous in low-income housing in ... developing countries', but also 'a view that poor, "shanty" housing ... somehow, regrettably, deserves demolition' (Potts 2006a: 275–6). As Potts points out, this view 'assumes that the occupants had some reasonable alternative and/or that their rights and needs are less important than those in legal houses', yet not only does it awkwardly replicate official statements – so weakening 'the logic of the opposition to the campaign' (Potts 2006a: 276) – but it also reverberates with the view that the aim of 'restoring order' was in principle legitimate, even if the execution of the programme was often experienced as a brutal exercise of power, or if these 'admirable' aims disguised other, more sinister political motives.

<sup>63</sup> *The Standard*, 3 July 2005.

government', in principle 'the clean up of central business district made eminent sense' as 'Harare had become a veritable dump'.<sup>64</sup>

Regardless, then, of the extent to which the government was able to persuasively expound the legitimacy of its intentions,<sup>65</sup> the logic of 'restoring order' and formal planning was *recognizable* and salient to many *victims* of the campaign, resonating both with varying, well-engrained, older aspirations to respectability and propriety (cf. Scarnecchia 1999; West 2002; Maxwell 2006), and memories of past 'slum clearances' and more stringent enforcement of planning regulations (Potts 2006a and 2006b; Dorman 2007; Mlambo 2008). Otherwise, the images of people dusting off old planning documents or minutely discussing past evictions, or what constitutes an illegal structure, would not make any sense at all. Moreover, the effect of this 'planning' aspect of the operation was reflected in the common sight of people destroying their own 'illegal structures' ahead of the arrival of council officials; in anticipation of the *tsunami*. Most of all, the point is made simply by the fact that in many areas ruined backyard shacks, tuckshops and other demolished 'illegal' structures have been neither rebuilt nor repaired.<sup>66</sup> With the exception of the 'resilient urbanites' of Mbare and Highfields, whom Mujere observed beginning to reconstruct shacks in late 2007 for want of income or shelter (Mujere 2007: 16), and notwithstanding dramatic shortages in financing and materials, few people, I suspect, would be likely to simply rebuild expensive backyard cottages unless they could do so with the sense of security that being 'on a plan' offers.

It seems Chombo's warnings to 'observe proper development procedures' have been taken seriously.<sup>67</sup> Of course, in the absence of formal employment, black market activities re-emerged almost immediately (Bratton and Masunungure 2006: 38), but, apart from the few traders allocated stands in rebuilt council markets,<sup>68</sup> most have continued 'playing hide and seek with municipal police'.<sup>69</sup> Both news reports later in the year,<sup>70</sup> and the account of the unfortunate vendor forced to labour on a vice-presidential farm, illustrate that the operation was 'not a once-off exercise but a sustained' effort, as Sekesai Makwarara had indeed warned in her opening announcement of

<sup>64</sup> *Zimbabwe Independent*, 24 June 2005.

<sup>65</sup> As Potts suggests, both the surprise and lack of preparation expressed by the government at the 'barrage of criticism it deservedly received from much of the world' (for example, 'Regime determined to shoot itself in the foot', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 8 July 2005) and the fact that the government's figures of the numbers of people affected 'were not a gross underestimate (as might have been expected given the level of international outcry) may 'have reflected a belief in the "legitimacy" of the operation and thus that there was no reason to hide anything' (Potts 2006a: 276).

<sup>66</sup> See also SPT 2006.

<sup>67</sup> *Sunday Mail*, 19 June 2005.

<sup>68</sup> These were in some cases vetted by the police. *The Herald*, 22 June 2005.

<sup>69</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 15 November 2005; see also 16 September 2005 and Mujere 2007: 14–16.

<sup>70</sup> For example, 'Murambatsvina strikes again', *The Standard*, 18 September 2005; and '250 squatters made "homeless" again', *Zimbabwe Independent*, 18 November 2005.

the operation on 19 May.<sup>71</sup> Evidently, the exercise was not just, in Chombo's words, a 'political gimmick' and the government was indeed, 'serious in what it says'.<sup>72</sup>

#### RUMOURS AND UNCERTAINTY

If Operation Murambatsvina was experienced in terms of a tension between the resonances of official appeals to 'planning' and its demonstration of ZANU PF's ability to deploy 'state power' ruthlessly, and as it chose, then perhaps it was the ambiguity and uncertainty provoked by this 'tension' which resulted in the extraordinary range of explanations, 'hidden' agendas and rumours which were circulating at that time. I have already mentioned some of these—that the initial operation was a means of emptying the city-centre streets and neutralizing a possible eruption of public discontent at worsening economic hardships; or a form of punishment against urban opposition supporters; or a means of electoral manipulation by forcing dramatic demographic change. Other suggestions included that the operation was the result of internal power struggles within the ruling party; or a means of overcoming labour shortages on resettled farms; or a means of centralizing power over urban areas and bypassing troublesome but elected urban councils (Ndlovu 2005). Other speculations focused on how the clearances affected war-veteran-led housing projects, suggesting that the aim was to 'clip the wings' of troublesome veterans, whose political uses as violent campaigners had been surpassed by the new availability of the youth militia.<sup>73</sup> Others focused on economic reasons: that the clearances of flea markets and street vendors were about reasserting central government (and ZANU PF) influence over the burgeoning, non-tax-paying informal economy. Rumours circulated that the operation derived from the growing ambitions of the Reserve Bank and ZIMRA<sup>74</sup> to exert more control over black market trading in scarce foreign currency. Rumours also later emerged about Operation Garikai: that new housing projects replacing demolished homes opened up new forms of political patronage to be exploited by the ruling party.<sup>75</sup>

Of course, discussion of 'rumours' and 'hidden agendas' provokes a somewhat circular scenario; uncertainty about the intentions behind the operation may have been reflected in this plethora of rumours, but

<sup>71</sup> Makwavarara's opening speech was reported in the *Saturday Herald*, 28 May 2005. For text see SPT 2005, Appendix 2.

<sup>72</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 15 November 2005.

<sup>73</sup> ZHR NGO Forum 2005a: 18.

<sup>74</sup> Zimbabwe Revenue Authority.

<sup>75</sup> Corruption scandals surrounding the allocation of Garikai stands suggest there may be something to this. Amnesty International claims that 20 per cent of houses built under Garikai 'were earmarked for civil servants, police and soldiers' (see Amnesty International 2007: 287). See also 'Chombo owns up to "Garikai" corruption', *The Standard*, 19 March 2006; 'Chefs grab "Garikai" houses', *The Standard*, 5 February 2006; also SPT 2006: 8.

the barrage of different, conflicting rumours must have simultaneously reinforced the sense of ambiguity, uncertainty and anxiety about what the purpose of the *tsunami* was. The array of differing official explanations may have contributed to the plethora of rumours about the possible 'hidden' political agendas behind the operation.<sup>76</sup> But these varying official explanations did tend to emphasize those aspects of the operation which could resonate with memories of past clearances and differing aspirations to respectability, as well as the more immediate, daily tribulations of urban residents.<sup>77</sup>

This occasional congruence of appeal, and the fact that many rumours engaged finely with, even as they twisted, official explanations, suggest it is probably mistaken to make a clear distinction between 'official reasons' for the operation and an alternative, rumour-based discourse of 'hidden' political agendas. Rather, it is precisely in the tension between official reasons and 'hidden' agendas – the tension between the demonstration of state power, and the resonances of official appeals to 'order' – that the political advantages for the ruling elite become most apparent. This is not to suggest that there was necessarily a 'master plan' to promote this ambiguous uncertainty.<sup>78</sup> Rather, I suspect that what actually happened is that the way the *tsunami* manifested itself in particular places and moments was a function of the complex multiplicity of different agendas located at different points in council, government and ruling party hierarchies. In other words, for some bashing troublesome war vets was important, for others punishing MDC voters or preventing a threatening public outpouring of discontent took priority, while for frustrated council planners the opportunity to reinforce bye-laws was too good to miss, ZIMRA officials saw a chance to raise scarce foreign currency, and so on.

<sup>76</sup> Despite Ignatius Chombo's denial of any 'political gimmick' behind the exercise, officials 'advanced a whole miscellany of reasons' for the operation, which were 'confusing and occasionally at variance with each other', ZHR NGO Forum 2005a: ii and 16.

<sup>77</sup> Like restoring the capital's 'sunshine status', undermining an aggressive black market, improving commuter transport, reducing crime, and enforcing planning regulations that would improve housing, ensure urban sanitation and protect public health, and so on.

<sup>78</sup> One NGO report (ZHR NGO Forum 2005a) oddly suggested the operation was provoked by the government's need to recapture 'international respectability' and the 're-engagement of the international community'. Realizing that this required a 'reversal of its whole style of governing, adherence to the rule of law, an end to political violence and repression, opening of the press and media space, and a cessation of all interference with citizens' basic freedoms', the Zimbabwean government also recognized, according to this explanation, that 'the greatest risk to repressive governments comes when they seek to liberalize'. Hence Operation Murambatsvina was supposed to 'eliminate' and 'neutralize' the political threats posed by a large, discontented urban population, ahead of reform efforts intended to 'overcome its international political and economic isolation'. While with hindsight it seems extraordinary to argue that Murambatsvina was part of a larger plan aimed at political reform (and recent events in Zimbabwe have shown that nothing like this has materialized at all) in a sense this theory itself illustrates the difficulties that people and organizations had in giving meaning to the complicated events of May–July 2005 as they unfolded, and the persuasiveness of a common tendency to attribute them to a single, conscious and intentional kind of political agency on the part of the ruling party.



The point here is not to uncover the multiple or 'real' origins of the operation but to explore the political affects of the way it was experienced. Key to this is separating *intention* from political *affect*. The tension between the resonances of official appeals to planning and the spectacle of state power deployed at ZANU PF's whim was not *necessarily* the result of any particular intentions.<sup>79</sup> In order to elaborate what I mean, I turn briefly to a master writer on political affect, Achilles Mbembe. In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe (2001) discusses the way in which the vulgar excesses of ruling elites in Cameroon are represented and satirized in newspaper cartoons. Mbembe questions the extent to which such satire, and the laughter it can provoke, really represents a 'speaking back' to power or a form of 'everyday resistance' (Scott 1985 and 1990). In his words,

The laughter of those crushed endeavours to respond, striving to humiliate 'the thing' utterly. But this second violence, far from signing the 'thing' in death, rather intensifies its presence by enclosing the subject in a mixture of fascination and dread... to the extent that it is the autocrat who offers speech, commands what is listened to and what is written, and fills the space to the point of still being talked of even as the act of creation is claiming to debase him. (Mbembe 2001: 165)

This is, as reviewers have noted, a profoundly pessimistic view, which deploys something akin to Bakhtin's carnivalesque 'baroque practices' yet rejects any notion of 'subalternity as resistance', favouring instead a vision of all encompassing power in order to explain the 'African potentate's long tenure' (Adeeko 2002; Weate 2003: 36). For Mbembe, post-coloniality is better understood not as a relationship of resistance or of collaboration, but as one of 'conviviality', which inscribes 'the dominant and the dominated within the same episteme' (Mbembe 2001: 110). As some commentators have noted, this is a distinctly Hegelian scheme (Adeeko 2002), yet the importance of Mbembe's approach lies in its 'hybrid amalgam of poststructuralist semiotics and existential phenomenology', aligned 'at some point between concrete lived experience and economies of the sign' (Weate 2003: 28–9). For Mbembe, the satirical cartoons that attempt to ridicule and thus debase the vulgar excesses of the political elite are 'an integral part of the stylistics of power' (2001: 115) which do not check the power of the 'elite' so much as reinforce their omnipotent presence. What I want to suggest, therefore, is that the plethora of rumours—what Ellis (1989) called 'pavement radio'—which circulated on the streets and sometimes in newspapers, about the 'true' intentions and 'hidden' political agendas that lay behind Operation Murambatsvina act in a way similar to Mbembe's cartoons, reinforcing the omnipotent presence of the ruling party elite, and its ability to deploy devastating 'state power' at will. While White's *Speaking With Vampires* (2000: 312)

<sup>79</sup> Although I suspect some of ZANU PF's sharper political minds must have been aware of it.



showed how 'stories and rumours . . . mark ways to talk about conflicts and contradictions that gave them meaning and power', Mbembe's text points the way towards 'recontextualizing' rumour 'as a quasi-material substance, as a hinge between the world of concepts and the world of bodily experience' (Weate 2003: 40). Rumours then, like cartoons, not only carry or reveal a complexity of meanings; they can have duplicitous political *affects*. In this sense, the popular dubbing of Operation Murambatsvina as Zimbabwe's *tsunami* not only reflects attempts to make sense of its perceived arbitrariness in terms which resonate internationally, and subvert official justifications for the operation; it also simultaneously *reifies* the very powerful presence of the ruling party and its ability to deploy force ruthlessly, as it chooses.<sup>80</sup>

But although there is something important in Mbembe's argument about the way cartoons, and in this case rumours, are part of the 'stylistics of power',<sup>81</sup> I am also suspicious of the pessimism of Mbembe's motif of 'all encompassing power'. Official justifications for Operation Murambatsvina did resonate with some people's sensibilities about good governance – and a bureaucratically functional 'state' – even if those same people did not necessarily approve of the operation. Such sensibilities do matter to the ruling party. Officials were keen to demonstrate the benign and 'proper' motives that lay behind the operation, even as ZANU PF, no doubt, absorbed the political advantages of demonstrating, again, its ability to deploy ruthless 'state power' as it chooses. That is surely why the government welcomed and facilitated the UN special envoy's visit to assess the impact of the operation.<sup>82</sup> And when her report (Tibaijuka 2005) fiercely denigrated it, the government responded by publishing an extremely lengthy, step-by-step refutation of the UN's findings (Government of Zimbabwe 2005). In sum, while the 'spectacle' of the violence of the clearances suited ZANU PF in terms of Mbembe's 'stylistics of power' (as a reification of its omni-powerful presence), the government also craved a kind of legitimacy which manifested itself in its attempts to appeal to (some) people's aspirations towards good governance and a functioning, bureaucratic state. And it is for this reason that the ambiguity and uncertainty of the tension between 'luck and planning', the demonstration of force and the resonances of official appeals to

<sup>80</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that two state agents were so amused when I responded 'You mean the *tsunami*!' when I was asked for my views on Operation Murambatsvina, during a two-hour security clearance interview with members of the 'President's Office' in August 2005.

<sup>81</sup> In particular, I am seduced by the notion that 'stateness' operates and is constantly being reimagined and reproduced in discourses and practices 'on the margins' (Tsing 1994; Das and Poole 2004; Hansen and Stepputat 2001) at the level of rumours and back street conversations.

<sup>82</sup> At the time there were signs that the government attempted to 'steer' the UN Envoy's investigations through its facilitation of the visit. This itself produced a variety of rumours: for example, that the suddenly disappearing queues for buses, and the temporary lifting of bans on private car owners providing transport for commuters, were aimed at promoting a rosier picture of the daily struggles of ordinary people in the capital (Notes, 6 July 2005).

the restoration of 'order', were of such political advantage to the ruling party.

In many ways, what I am describing here is not unique to post-colonial Zimbabwe; indeed my theoretical framework is part of a broader trend in political anthropology which has explored the interplay of Foucauldian and Gramscian notions of power and hegemony, governance and sovereignty; the role of political affect (Deleuze and Guattari 2004); and the importance of the margins in the ongoing process of the construction of the state (Hansen and Steputt 2001; Tsing 1994; Das and Poole 2004). In her fascinating analysis of 'state rituals', 'public statism' and the production of 'civil society' in Turkey, Navaro-Yashin (2002: 117–54) comes to the following conclusion, which I think has significant echoes in what I have been discussing.

Statism, then, persists through both repressive and productive mechanisms of power, not only one or the other as temporarily privileged by Michel Foucault. There is a level of agency and spontaneity among the so-called people, a willing initiative to stand for the state. The difference between the two, spontaneity and enforcement, is blurred. It is perhaps within this blurred zone that power so effectively operates (and where it is regenerated) in contemporary Turkey and the statist world we live in today. (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 154)

In many ways this 'blurring' of 'spontaneity and enforcement', between 'repressive and productive mechanisms of power', mirrors the ambiguity and uncertainty of the tension between a display of force and the appeal to 'planning' that I have focused on here. But one last issue still needs to be resolved. If this very tension was of such political advantage to the ruling elite, as 'the blurred zone' where 'power so effectively operates', what is left of 'resistance' and 'agency'? Does this analysis not merely repeat or indeed further reinforce Mbembe's bleak picture of 'all encompassing power'? I am not comfortable with that image. If rumours are the site of the reinforcement of a particular mechanism of 'state power', if rumours that seek to subvert or reveal the truth behind official representations actually duplicitously and treacherously reify the omnipotent presence they seek to undermine, then surely this can work both ways. There must always remain the possibility that rumours can subvert the other, 'productive aspect of power', which appeals to or resonates with some people's aspirations to good governance and a functioning state. The Zimbabwean government was very keen to demonstrate the legitimacy of its intentions, and there were indications of official uneasiness at some of the rumours circulating about the 'hidden agendas' behind the operation. This was perhaps best revealed by another rumour circulating in June 2005 – that one could be arrested for referring to Murambatsvina as the *tsunami*. One man was allegedly 'beaten and left for dead by five soldiers' for exactly that.<sup>83</sup> Later, similar rumours

<sup>83</sup> See ZHR NGO Forum 2005c.

emerged that a common derogatory reference to poor-quality Chinese goods (which have in recent years littered Zimbabwean markets) as *zhingzhong* was also an arrestable offence.<sup>84</sup> Of course the existence of such 'counter-rumours' can be taken to demonstrate not only the insecurity of officials, but also, again, a kind of reinforcement of ZANU PF's powerful presence. In a way, the circular nature of this argument in itself represents exactly the ambiguous nature of rumours that I am highlighting.

The issue of *mazhingzhong* leads me to a final rumour about the 'hidden' political intentions behind Operation Murambatsvina, which I have not yet mentioned. According to this rumour, the attack upon informal traders was 'nothing but a shameless attempt by the government to protect Chinese traders', who had allegedly 'complained to President Mugabe that the flea markets were taking away a huge chunk of their business'.<sup>85</sup> Morgan Tsvangirai, MDC leader, reportedly said 'the country has been mortgaged to the Chinese... how can we violently remove Zimbabweans from our flea markets to make way for the Chinese? The majority of Zimbabweans depend on informal trade to feed, clothe, and educate their families'.<sup>86</sup> With the high profile being given at that particular moment to the government's 'Look East Policy' as a means of solving Zimbabwe's fiscal crisis,<sup>87</sup> it is not surprising that widespread, popular references to Chinese products as *mazhingzhong* were not well appreciated, particularly given the disturbing racial undertones of some such references.<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, of all the rumours that I have discussed, the suggestion that the 'real' intention of the clearances was to 'make space' in local markets for Chinese traders had perhaps the greatest potential to provoke official uneasiness, because it strikes so hard at the core of what Ranka Primorac (2005: 2) has called Zimbabwe's 'whole, coherent and self-perpetuating' post-colonial 'master fiction', in which the ruling party, war veterans and particularly President Mugabe himself are represented as the heroic defenders of Zimbabwean sovereignty against foreign interference and neo-colonialism (see also Ranger 2004a). The subversive potential of this rumour is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that, a year later, public anger at the effects of unfettered Chinese

<sup>84</sup> This was also reported in the media – for example, 'Zimbabwe: Look East policy failing; Mugabe's drive to win wealthy and uncritical friends in East Asia does little to rescue the economy', Africa Reports No. 42, 27 September 2005, ([http://iwpr.net/?p=acr&s=f&o=253560&apc\\_state=heniacr2005](http://iwpr.net/?p=acr&s=f&o=253560&apc_state=heniacr2005)), accessed 15 December 2008.

<sup>85</sup> 'Chinese inflict huge blow on struggling Zimbabwean industries', *Zim Online* (SA), 23 May 2005.

<sup>86</sup> 'Zimbabwe's new colonialists: Mugabe begins selling off his country to curry favour with the Chinese', *The Weekly Standard*, 25 May 2005.

<sup>87</sup> For example, *Daily Mirror*, 18 May 2005; *The Herald*, 25 May 2005.

<sup>88</sup> For example, one commentator writing in *The Zimbabwean* asked 'Did the Heroes die so that these horrible little Zhing Zhong's could run rampant over our people, shout their strange language in our ears, and cast their cheap rubbish in our faces? I don't think so.' *The Zimbabwean*, 11 August 2005.

trade in Zimbabwe (and the poor quality of some Chinese imports) had reached such a crescendo that ZANU PF's politburo had to take note. As one politburo member put it, 'although the Chinese are our friends, they are making the people hate the government'.<sup>89</sup> ZANU PF's newspaper, *The Voice*, reported that Vice-President Mujuru informed the politburo that 'all Chinese deals would now have to be "evaluated"'.<sup>90</sup> Clearly, the idea that the government was 'selling out' to the Chinese was far too disconcerting to be simply ignored, and the 'counter-rumour' that one could be arrested for making such derogatory remarks was more than simply 'an integral part of the stylistics of power' as Mbembe's analysis might have us think. Rather, I suggest, it reflected genuine concern about the threat posed by this rumour.

Back in July 2005, intrigued by the idea that police might be arresting people for referring to Chinese goods as *mazhingzhong* (which was extremely common), I took an opportunity one Friday, when my car broke down in central Harare, to see if there was any truth in it (Notes, 16 July 2005). Faulty part in hand, I arrived at the auto repair shop to find a policeman involved in a light-hearted conversation with a shop attendant. Complaining about having to report for duty, he exclaimed that 'It is a nuisance having to do these roadblocks every day!' Sensing the jovial mood, I joked in Shona, 'So even the police get bored with roadblocks, because they really trouble us!' The policeman laughed and then asked why I had come into the shop. I explained I had come to replace a faulty part for my car: 'I was sold this condenser but it doesn't work. I was sold this *zhingzhong*.' Laughing at my audacity, the policemen warned: 'You could be arrested for saying that!' Pushing the point, I asked, 'Are you going to arrest me now?' It was all a joke and I was not arrested, but I did not push the matter further, sensing I might have reached the boundary.

Later I reflected on this event. Contrary to another less jovial moment at a roadblock a few weeks earlier (Notes, 6 July 2005), when an angry policeman handed my companion an on-the-spot fine for 'being uncooperative', the policeman in the shop seemed to have been in a good mood. The comparison of these events illustrates perfectly the larger argument of Das and Poole's book (2004), that 'the entirety of the state is a margin' (Asad 2004: 287), and that it is exactly on these all-pervasive but necessarily ambiguous and uncertain 'margins' that unstable 'state power' has constantly to be re-established. The incident with the jovial policeman in the shop laughing at my reference to *zhingzhong* suggests that if the rumours that circulated about Operation Murambatsvina are an example of the constant

<sup>89</sup> Adding that 'it was "rather unfair" for them to provide quality services and goods to Western countries "at our expense"', *The Standard*, 22 October 2006.

<sup>90</sup> Cited in *The Standard*, 22 October 2006. According to *The Standard*, 'the fallout over trading with China has already claimed the scalp of Zimbabwe's Ambassador to China and former Mugabe minder, Chris Mutsvangwa, who is reported to be on his way out of the diplomatic service'.

re-making of 'stateness' on the margins, then not only can the uncertain ambiguity of such rumours reinforce the omnipotent presence of the 'arbitrary' 'state power' available to a ruling elite, but they can also illustrate the omnipresence of its fundamental insecurity.

#### CONCLUSIONS

However much the 'crash' (Tibaijuka 2005: 1) of Murambatsvina took people by surprise, there was actually little that was particularly unprecedented about the ruling party's impulse to launch such an unexpected operation. Indeed, since the late 1990s, perhaps beginning with the war veteran pay-offs in 1997, and certainly with fast-track land reform in 2000, launching the unexpected has almost become a government 'trademark' in itself. Although always provoking accusations about the lack of proper government 'planning' or indeed 'fiscal discipline', such programmes have never operated entirely outside the scope of state planning departments, and often, through time, have witnessed a kind of reassertion of centralized state institutions. The fast-track land reform programme is a good example. While some commentators noted how the land 'invasions' of 2000–1 provoked the 'strange spectacle [of] a government effectively unravelling its own state with great vigour' (Alexander 2003: 114), others charted a move from '*jambanja* to planning' (Chaumbe *et al.* 2003) that amounted to a 'reassertion of technocracy' amidst the 'new politics and new livelihoods' that emerged on the back of profound agrarian change. Similarly, assaults by war veterans on local authorities in Matabeleland and Midlands in 2001 provided an (imperfect) cover for the re-articulation, at district and provincial levels, of a highly centralized authority in which state and party structures were increasingly conflated (McGregor 2002). Likewise Operation Murambatsvina—and its successor Operation Garikai—continue an established pattern of inclusion and exclusion (Dorman 2003) which involves, as the contours of citizenship are redefined, both the dismantling or bypassing of local state institutions and their subsequent reassertion in more centralized and politicized forms.

These issues remain controversial and academic debates continue to focus on whether the emergence of 'authoritarian nationalism' (Hammer and Raftopoulos 2003) in Zimbabwe represents a retreat from, exhaustion by (Bond and Manyanya 2003; Campbell 2003), or redefinition of (Worby 2003: 68) the 'modern', 'developmental', post-colonial state in favour of a renewed anti-colonial focus on sovereignty and self-determination. This article has not entered into this broader debate about Zimbabwe's ongoing crisis. Engaging with recent anthropological discussions of 'the state' as it appears at the margins, I have sought to move beyond what has been increasingly recognized as an overly simplistic distinction between either resistance to, or complicity with any dominant 'power'. Deploying Mbembe's notion of the conviviality of relations between the 'powerful and

the powerless' – a relationship defined neither by collaboration nor resistance – yet seeking to avoid his pessimistic vision of all-persuasive, all-complicit, all-encompassing power, I have argued that regardless of any apparently hegemonic control of the media, and other symbolic, social and material resources, a ruling entity must constantly engage with those discourses and rumours that occur on its multiple margins. In participating in these ongoing and incomplete re-imaginings, ruling potentates do not necessarily control the terms of the debates and rumours in which they are implicated, regardless of how hard they may try to do so. Indeed such attempts can offer glimpses into the substantial insecurity – or even emptiness (Taussig 1992) – that can lie at the centre; so that rumours about people being arrested for using the word *tsunami* to describe Operation Murambatsvina, or for referring to cheap Chinese imports as *zhingzhong*, reveal something of the tenuous position of elites, even as the same rumours may also reify their omnipotent presence. Just as, on a material level, scholars of political economy have often emphasized that 'the exercise of government in all modern states entails the articulation of a form of pastoral care with sovereign power' (Hammer 2003: 130–1; Dean 2001: 53), so too are ruling 'elites' holding the reins at the 'centre' inevitably engaged in discourses and rumours on the omnipresent 'margins', the terms of which can often, try as they might, lie outside their grip.

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# ABSTRACT

Using ethnographic material alongside newspaper and NGO reports, this article explores popular responses to ZANU PF's devastating Operation Murambatsvina, commonly dubbed Zimbabwe's *tsunami*, which targeted informal markets and 'illegal' housing across Zimbabwe between May and August of 2005, making an estimated 700,000 people homeless and indirectly affecting a quarter of Zimbabwe's population. The article argues that central to experiences of these dramatic events 'on the ground' (particularly in Harare's high- and low-density suburbs of Chitungwiza and Hatfield, where most of the ethnographic material was collected) was a profound tension between the resonances evoked by official appeals to a reassertion of 'order' and formal planning procedures, and the spectacle of ZANU PF's public demonstration of its ability to deploy state 'force' ruthlessly, and indeed 'arbitrarily'; that is, as, when and how it chose. Although the brutal execution of the programme was widely condemned by observers and victims alike, less reported has been the way in which official justifications for the operation were sometimes recognizable and salient to people living in urban areas across

Zimbabwe, resonating with memories of past clearances, or with longstanding and divergent aspirations for respectability, urban 'order', and a functioning, bureaucratic state. It is argued that in the ambiguity and uncertainty generated by this tension the political advantages of the operation for the ruling party become most apparent. Relating the plethora of rumours circulating at the time (about the 'hidden agendas' behind the operation) to Mbembe's work on post-colonial conviviality, the article argues that like Mbembe's satirical cartoons these rumours did not so much undermine or subvert the authority of ZANU PF as reinforce its omnipotent presence. However, unlike the pessimism of Mbembe's vision of all encompassing power, it is argued that if the rumours that circulated about Operation Murambatsvina are an example of the constant re-making of 'stateness' on the margins, then the uncertain ambiguity of such rumours can not only reinforce the omnipotent presence of the 'state power', but also illustrate the omnipresence of its fundamental insecurity.

#### RÉSUMÉ

À partir de matériel ethnographique, d'articles de presse et de rapports d'ONG, cet article explore les réponses populaires à l'opération Murambatsvina du ZANU PF, initiative désastreuse communément surnommée le *tsunami* du Zimbabwe; elle ciblait les marchés informels et les constructions « illégales » au Zimbabwe entre mai et août 2005, affectant indirectement un quart de la population du Zimbabwe et laissant sans abri 700 000 personnes, selon des estimations. L'article soutient que les expériences de ces événements dramatiques « sur le terrain » (notamment à Chitungwiza et Hatfield, banlieues d'Harare à forte et faible densité de population, où a été recueilli l'essentiel du matériel ethnographique) avaient pour élément central une profonde tension entre les résonances évoquées par les appels officiels à un rétablissement de l'« ordre » et de procédures d'urbanisme formelles, et le spectacle offert par le ZANU PF en démontrant publiquement sa capacité à déployer la « force » de l'État sans ménagement et même arbitrairement, à savoir en jugeant lui-même de la pertinence, de la manière et du moment. Si l'exécution brutale du programme a certes été largement condamnée par les observateurs et les victimes, un moindre écho a été donné à la manière dont les justifications officielles à l'opération étaient parfois reconnaissables et évidentes aux yeux des habitants des zones urbaines du Zimbabwe, résonnant avec des souvenirs d'anciennes expulsions ou avec de vieilles aspirations divergentes à la respectabilité, à l'« ordre » urbain et à un état bureaucratique fonctionnel. L'article affirme que c'est dans l'ambiguïté et l'incertitude générées par cette tension que les avantages politiques de l'opération pour le parti au pouvoir se manifestent le plus. En rapportant la pléthore de rumeurs qui ont circulé à l'époque (concernant les intentions qui se cachaient derrière l'opération) à l'œuvre de Mbembe sur la convivialité post-coloniale, l'article soutient que ces rumeurs, tout comme les dessins satiriques de Mbembe, ont davantage renforcé la présence omnipotente du ZANU PF que porté atteinte ou menacé son autorité. Cependant, contrairement à la vision pessimiste que Mbembe a du pouvoir omniprésent, l'article avance que si les rumeurs qui ont circulé à propos de l'opération Murambatsvina sont un exemple du renouveau constant de l'« étatité » à la marge, l'ambiguïté incertaine de telles rumeurs ne peut donc pas seulement renforcer la présence omnipotente du « pouvoir d'État », mais également illustrer l'omniprésence de son insécurité fondamentale.